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Exploring the Experiences of Domestic Abuse Survivors – The Effectiveness
and Role of Support Systems in the Lives of Survivors within the UK

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ABSTRACT

Domestic abuse is a serious social problem, and its prevalence is only increasing within the UK. This study aimed to explore the experiences of women who have suffered from the traumatic events of domestic abuse. This study intended to gain an insight into the mechanisms that assist women in leaving abusive relationships, assess the effectiveness of the support services and their role in enabling recovery. Semi-structured interviews were carried out in order to collect data and then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The two super-ordinate themes deriving from the analysis were The Leaving Process and Support System and the two sub-ordinate themes deriving from the analysis were Fear and Recovery. The findings suggested that Fear was the main factor which motivated women to leave an abusive relationship. In terms of the support services findings suggested that intervention programs such as support groups and counselling were effective tools that enabled women to regain their sense of self, increase their self-efficacy and self-esteem, and helped them to feel empowered and confident within themselves.

KEY WORDS:	DOMESTIC ABUSE	SUPPORT SERVICES	IPA	FEAR	RECOVERY
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INTRODUCTION

What is Domestic Abuse?

Domestic abuse is a traumatic phenomenon influenced by social, cultural and psychological factors (Ghani, 2014). Women's Aid UK defines domestic abuse

“as an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer” (Women's Aid, 2015: 1)

Domestic abuse is often identified as a gender issue, research suggests that women are at a higher risk than men of being targeted as a victim of domestic abuse within relationships (Mitchell & Hodson, 1983). A British Crime Survey (BCS) carried out in 2001 supported this statement as the findings demonstrated that the percentage of women experiencing domestic violence or abuse was approximately twice than that of men (Walby & Allen, 2004).

Furthermore, domestic abuse is a major social issue that has been recognised as occurring across all religions, ethnicities, cultures, ages and economic status (Pyles & Postmus, 2004). Additionally, domestic abuse is a significant public health problem in numerous countries acting as a burden to the social services, health-care and the criminal justice system. The harm depicted by domestic abuse is problematic in terms of the physical, emotional, psychological and behavioural damage caused (Heise et al., 1994; Berry, 2000).

Domestic abuse is a predominantly hidden crime that primarily occurs at home behind closed doors, women often underreport or do not report domestic abuse to social services or the police (HMIC, 2014: 31). Statistics show that an estimated 1.3 million women had experienced domestic abuse in 2016. In addition, data shows that 4.3 million women have experienced domestic abuse at some point in their life (ONS, 2017). Approximately, two women are murdered by their partner or ex-partner every week in England and Wales, domestic abuse related crime has significantly increased since 2015 within the UK (HMIC, 2015: 28).

Despite a vast number of studies and research reports conducted every year, investigating domestic abuse globally, knowledge about the experiences of women who have suffered abuse is lacking. Conspicuously, the impact of such victimisation experiences may have antagonistic consequences for the victims, their families and the society as a whole.

The Causes and Effects of Domestic Abuse

Most people attempt to blame domestic abuse on various factors, although these factors may contribute to the likelihood of abuse they are not causes of domestic abuse. Abusive behaviour is generally operated as a route to achieve and maintain male domination, power and control over women (Cunningham et al., 1998; Mauricio & Gormley, 2001). Research illustrates, most abusers grow up witnessing abuse in their own homes, in which they learn to view physical and emotional abuse as a genuine form to vent anger, in order to cope with their personal fears and self-perception issues (Heise, 1998).

Cross-cultural ethnographic studies demonstrate that domestic abuse against women is more indigenous in cultures and subcultures, in which men mainly dictate decision-making and assign permanent submissive gender roles to women (WHO, 2002; Heise, 1998). Some socio-political theories direct towards structural inequalities as a main cause of men inflicting abuse against women. Even though domestic abuse occurs across all social backgrounds, evidence suggests men belonging to a lower socio-economic status inflict more abuse. Socio-structural theories propose, men inflict domestic abuse as a reaction to stress when their masculinity is in crisis in situations such as unemployment, relative deprivation or a change in gender roles (Heise, 1998; Jewkes, 2002). Individual developmental and personality theories introduce, that interrelated factors such as disrupted parenting, insecure or disorganised attachment styles, depression, personality disorders and other emotional difficulties could maybe account for some of the many reasons why men become abusive towards their partners (West & George, 1998; Sonkin & Dutton, 2003).

Domestic abuse can leave women distraught and the effects of abuse can be somewhat unbearable. Women who have been abused live in constant fear, unable to predict when their partner will attack again (Refuge, 2017: 1). The effects of domestic abuse leave women experiencing conflicting emotions of fear, shame, sadness and helplessness as well as increased levels of depression, lower self-esteem and high levels of psychological distress (Khan et al., 1993; Cascardi & O'Leary, 1992). Herman (1992), suggests that many women who have experienced abuse suffer from a complex traumatic syndrome that is similar to the diagnosis of PTSD which consists of symptoms such as depression, anxiety, idealisation of the abuser and dissociation because of the nature of trauma. It is argued that such effects may make women psychologically vulnerable and their functioning may become impaired diminishing their ability to initiate action (Herman, 1992).

Barriers to Leaving an Abusive Relationship – Why Women Stay

It has been argued that domestic abuse is not recognised as a serious crime by the criminal justice system, this is because of the perception that women are willing to stay in abusive relationships (Hayes, 2014). Firstly, women are socialised into accepting the nurturing role in a relationship, they may feel empathetic towards their abuser and take it upon themselves to be responsible for 'fixing' them, as they may identify their abuser as being damaged in some way (Hayes & Jeffries, 2013). Some women may not initially understand they are being abused, for instance, if their partner wants to know their whereabouts, calls continuously throughout the day, displays jealousy or discourages them to meet with their friends so they can spend more time together may be seen to them as a demonstration of love rather than controlling behaviour (Power et al., 2006). Previous research suggests it may take some time for women to realise that these controlling behaviours are not passionate but intimidating and alarming (Fraser, 2005).

Social beliefs about relationships and marriage associate women with the act of loyalty, compelling them to commit to their relationship and make it work regardless of the abuse. Therefore, this belief leads to women prioritising maintenance of their relationship and believing that their love can overcome all obstacles (Fraser, 2005). Consequently, women blame themselves for the abuse

inflicted upon them and they believe if they love their partner more, try harder and become more-worthy the abuse will end as they will no longer deserve it (Power et al., 2006).

Many abusers adopt controlling and coercive behaviour to keep their victim from leaving, they engage in assault and also threaten, humiliate and intimidate their victim to harm and punish them. Women experiencing such abuse become so frightened that they would rather stay and endure the abuse than leave. Other tactics employed by the abuser include threats of suicide and threats of killing their partner, harming the children or removing them from the mother by threatening to sue for custody of the children (Hennessey, 2012).

Comprehensively, most abusers manage the household finances leaving the women to be financially dependent on them. Without any money, access to resources or having no place to go can seem impossible for women to leave, resulting in helplessness (Wood, 2001). Women find it extremely difficult to leave a relationship especially if they are married. Several factors including economic concerns, legal or social restraints and child welfare concerns intensify the costs of leaving a marriage (Kim & Gray, 2008).

Literature has emphasised the link between domestic abuse and social isolation. Describing social isolation as a form of social and psychological abuse, many have suggested that socially isolated women are less likely to leave an abusive relationship (Goodman & Smyth, 2011; Miller 1995; Follingstad & Dehert, 2000).

Factors Influencing Women to Leave an Abusive Relationship

Despite the difficulty of leaving an abusive relationship most victims do eventually leave, however it may take several attempts before they are successful. Previous literature suggests that factors such as low relationship commitment and economic independence are both consistent predictors of women leaving an abusive relationship (Anderson & Saunders, 2003; Rusbult & Martz, 1995). Additional factors include the frequency and severity of abuse, women who left abusive relationships are likely to have experienced psychological abuse for an extensive period of time. A main factor that would influence a woman to leave is if they have experienced severe physical, sexual and or psychological abuse (Davis, 2002).

A study conducted by Koepsell, Kernic and Holt (2006), found that women who leave an abusive relationship were less likely to be problem drinkers, were highly depressive and had poor physical health than women who stayed in abusive relationships. After completion of the study they also found that women of a younger age were significantly more likely to leave an abusive relationship.

One of the factors that influence women to leave an abusive relationship is when they face reality, accept the situation they are in and choose to grow from it. Once women realise that they are not to blame for the abuse they are determined to regain their self-worth and decide to leave. In addition, one main influential factor is child protection, this is a priority for women, if they identify potential child abuse they are more likely to leave (Burke et al., 2001).

The Role of Domestic Abuse Support Services

The support services for women that have experienced domestic abuse are available throughout the UK. They provide a safe environment for women and are available to help them recover from the abuse. Support services use various interventions that are facilitated by professionals to provide emotional, psychological and educational support to women who share problems and situations of domestic abuse.

One intervention that is commonly used with domestic abuse victims is the support group (Lyon et al., 2011). Support groups are provided in order to increase women's feelings of support and overall well-being as well as reducing them from stress (Bradshaw, 2011). Literature shows that women who access support services and utilise interventions such as support groups are likely to recover from depression (Pfeiffer, et al., 2011). Studies show women who receive support from the services, participate in support groups show a positive change in self-esteem and self-efficacy. Additionally, accessing the support services enables women to connect with others who share similar situations, making them feel validated. Also attending support groups helps women to reduce the feeling of isolation and allows them to hear and share their experiences which provides them with a sense of support and encouragement (Bright et al., 1999).

Overall studies report that the support services enable women to make significant changes to their lives. Staff working within these services provide women with a great sense of belonging and help to decrease their distress (Sullivan, 2012). In a study conducted by Sullivan (2012), women who accessed support services were interviewed, the findings concluded that the support groups empowered the survivors, made them feel more connected to others, helped them to discover and learn coping tools in order to make any positive changes in their lives they desired.

Research Aims

My research aims are to explore the experiences of females, who have gone through traumatic events of domestic abuse and have received support from the services. I aim to gain insight about the mechanisms that assisted these women in the leaving process and how effective the domestic abuse support services have been for them in enabling recovery.

Methodology

The emphasis in this study is on the experiences of women who have experienced domestic abuse and received support from the services. This study employs a qualitative methodology, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, 1996) as it has shown to assist in exploring the depth and complexity of human experiences (Morrow, 2007).

IPA, developed by Smith (1996), is a method which intends to investigate and capture ones' personal experiences. The aim of IPA is to understand the specific aspects of how one experiences a phenomenon from a particular perspective within a specific context. IPA considers the ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences and how they attribute meanings to the experienced life events (Smith et al., 2009). IPA seeks to explore lived experiences accompanied

with subjective and reflective processes of interpretations (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005).

IPA is an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research consisting of three epistemological underpinnings which include phenomenology, hermeneutics and ideography.

Phenomenology approaches the study of experiences in detail (Smith et al., 2009) whereas hermeneutics studies the interpretations made from ones' experiences. Smith (2009), states that phenomenology and hermeneutics are both connected as without phenomenology there would be nothing to interpret and without hermeneutics the phenomenology cannot be identified. The idiographic approach within IPA is concerned with distinct and unique events (Shinebourne, 2011). The experiences of the phenomenon being studied are considered on their individual terms and are not classified into pre-defined categories, via inductive bottom-up processes.

Rationale for using IPA

IPA was selected as an appropriate approach in order to explore the experiences of women who have extricated themselves from abusive relationships and have accessed the domestic abuse support services. The aim is to gain insight of the women's experiences whilst accessing the support services and how they helped them make positive changes. Therefore, IPA fits well with this study as it aims to provide a detailed interpretation of the data regarding the experiences of the survivors'. IPA will consider the rich, flexible examination of the survivors' lived experiences and allow the researcher to understand how these women have made sense of their experiences and the meaning it may hold for them.

Methods

Research Design

Semi-structured interviews were utilised to gather data. An interview schedule was produced in order to evoke participants' accounts of their experiences during the process of leaving a domestic abuse relationship and accessing support services. This procedure allowed me to engage well with the women whilst following the schedule but also provided me with the freedom and flexibility to follow any important and intriguing issues that emerged during the interview. It was made sure that all participants were in a quiet and safe environment in which they felt comfortable to answer questions and privacy was maintained. A tape recorder was used to record dialogue during the interview process in order to transcribe data and carry out the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical proposal for this research project was granted approval by the Department of Psychology of Manchester Metropolitan University. In addition, the researcher completely considered the ethical implications of the proposed research and abided by the British Psychological Society code of ethics and conduct (2009). All participants were provided with an information sheet which clearly stated details about the aims of the study and how their participation will contribute to the research if they decide to consent. Informed consent was

attained once it was apparent that participants understood the information provided to them and what their participation involved. The consent form included all contact information regarding the details of the researcher, supervisor, the study aims and its purpose, anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time up to a specific date.

Although this study did not intend to involve any risk to participants the researcher took into consideration the possibility that during the recall of traumatic events of abuse participants may feel distressed. Therefore, the researcher aimed to minimise the possibility by providing participants with a debrief sheet. This consisted of relevant sources that could be accessed in the event of any participant requiring support following the interview process. Participants were reassured that at any time during the interview if they wish to stop or take a break they could do so. The participants were also reassured that they have the right to refuse any questions they are not comfortable with answering.

Participant Recruitment

A small sample of six participants were recruited as the IPA sampling criteria's main focus is on small purposive samples of less than ten participants. Each participant provides an informative and detailed account of their experiences regarding the phenomenon and their reflection upon it (Reid et al, 2005). All participants were purposely sought out and recruited because they had a perspective to share about the phenomenon being studied.

All participants were recruited via a snowball sample, contacted by phone and email as their contact information was provided through initial acquaintances with their knowledge and agreement. Selected participants were sent an invitation email explaining the topic area and were informed if they choose to participate they will be sent an information sheet and consent form. After consent was obtained by all participants, appointment times and locations were agreed upon to conduct interviews.

All participants recruited, had recovered from domestic abuse issues and had gone through support services and been out of the support system for three years or more. Women who were approached were all over the age of 18 and now in a better place and in healthy relationships.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Marital Status</i>	<i>Children</i>	<i>No. of years in abusive relationship</i>	<i>No. of years received support</i>
<i>Sophie</i>	31	White British	Law Student	Single	0	4	2
<i>Maya</i>	28	White British	Office Manager	In a relationship	0	2.5	11 months
<i>Kylie</i>	34	British Pakistani	Nurse	Married	2	6	1.5
<i>Hannah</i>	37	White British	Support Worker	Married	3	3	3
<i>Louise</i>	29	White British	Store Assistant	Single	0	2	1
<i>Monica</i>	42	British Indian	Stay at home mum	Married	3	7	2

The Pilot-Study

The pilot interview was carried out with Sophie, a Law student who had been in an abusive relationship for four years and had received support from the services for two years. The pilot interview provided me with the opportunity to clarify the questions and the schedule. The initial interview provided me with an estimate of the responses to the questions and any problems that could occur during the process. My previous knowledge of domestic abuse and services came from literature I had researched and some accounts of abuse I had heard from family and friends. I was unaware of the intensity and emotions I would experience whilst listening to stories of such courageous and strong women. I obtained detailed and meaningful data from my interview with Sophie and left feeling content that it went really well, astounded by what she had experienced and proud of the support services available in the UK for women who had suffered from domestic abuse. I followed identical procedures for the remaining interviews with the rest of the participants ensuring that all ethical and methodological consideration were kept the same.

Quality and Validity in Qualitative Research

It is argued that good qualitative research should demonstrate sensitivity to context, commitment, transparency and coherence and impact and importance (Yardley, 2000).

Sensitivity to context was established throughout the study, from the literature to the participants selected for the research data. The introduction to the study ensured that it focused on women who had experienced domestic abuse and accessed the support services to enable recovery. Being empathetic during the

interview process, allowing the participant to be comfortable, select the location and providing them with control over the process gave sensitivity to the participants individual context. Sensitivity was continued throughout the analysis, being attentive to detail provided by the participant and using quotes to support findings.

Commitment was demonstrated as accuracy throughout the data process and analysis was maintained. The dimension of commitment was present throughout the recruitment of participants, whilst engaging with participants respectfully and sensitively as well as committing to a comprehensive analysis.

Transparency and coherence is established throughout this study by an extensive description of how participants were recruited, by the structure of the interview schedule and how the interviews were carried out. The researcher insists that the arguments brought forward in this project are coherent in order to determine validity of qualitative research. Transparency was aimed through a reflexive statement of the researcher's assumptions, values and interests in understanding the women's experiences of surviving through domestic abuse and accessing support services to recover from the traumatic events.

The researcher aimed to demonstrate throughout this study an important and useful reflection on how women who have experienced domestic abuse manage to leave and recover from the pain with the help received from support services. Domestic abuse is a serious issue in various countries and requires attention due to its prevalence. This project aims to expand understanding of the meanings and complexities of the experiences of domestic abuse survivors and their process of healing. It is intended that the findings from this study will assist women who are experiencing domestic abuse today, to acknowledge that there is help available for them and to provide them with courage to make healthy and positive changes.

Transcriptions and Analytic Strategy

An IPA approach was utilised to analyse the data, allowing the researcher to gain insight of the participant's world and understand the complexity and meaning of the participants experiences through their narrative (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

During transcription of the interviews I paid attention to the participants behaviour such as laughter, extensive pauses and language used in order to maintain accuracy during the analysis as suggested by Smith and Dunworth (2003). Each interview transcript was analysed individually and read repetitively as recommended by Henwood and Pidgeon (1994). They proposed that the research should be "*sensitive to the complexities of behaviour and the meaning in context*" (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994 :227). Any issues, themes, sub-themes and meanings that emerged from the interviews were noted down separately as the transcripts were detailed and long to write beside them in the margin. The lines were numbered on the transcript, so the researcher could refer back to them easily throughout the analysis. Any identifying features such as names of participants or other individuals mentioned were changed to protect anonymity.

Analysis & Discussion

The analysis of the transcripts exhibited data that provided a substantial description of the experiences of the women leaving an abusive relationship and

seeking support from the services to facilitate recovery. This section presents the two super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes that derived from the analysis of six interview transcripts and recordings, applying the analytic surgery described above.

Whilst developing an interpretative account of the women's experiences, importance was given to those themes which appeared most suitable to answer the research question.

The two super-ordinate themes identified that describe the experiences of women during leaving the abusive relationship and accessing the services are ***The Leaving Process*** and ***Support system***. These two super-ordinate themes have been composed for the transparency of the presentation, they determine to highlight parts of the most intriguing and relevant extracts that have appeared as a result of the data process. The purpose of these themes is to present an illustration of the traumatic experiences of leaving an abusive partner and receiving support from the services.

Each sub-ordinate theme will be demonstrated and interpreted using quotations from the interviews. Participants are mentioned by pseudonyms and line reference numbers indicate the source.

This section presents the findings with an interpretative analysis and a discussion of relevant literature that can provide an explanation. The researcher perceived that this would provide a more accurate and flowing presentation to understand the experiences of the participants.

Table 2. Super-ordinate and Sub-ordinate themes

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes
The leaving process	Fear
Support system	Recovery

Super-Ordinate Theme - The Leaving Process

This super-ordinate theme describes the women's emotions and feelings that influenced them to make the decision to leave the abusive relationship. A range of emotions were experienced by these women that helped them to reach the point of ultimatum and to seek support from the services. These women experienced anger, sadness, distress, disbelief and lack of trust in their partner which served as mechanisms to leave.

Sub-Ordinate Theme – Fear

All participants' accounts of their experience of making the decision to leave derived from the emotion of fear. This emotion was triggered in response to threat and the possibility that their physical self might be harmed by their partner.

The participants' accounts of their reaction to the abuse inflicted by their partner which made them feel the most intense feeling of fear towards them, in this particular moment they knew they had to leave if they wanted to survive.

Sophie describes her experience of a fearful moment when her partner abused her which left her bleeding and in extreme physical pain

“my ex came home drunk and started to hit me really hard I was bleeding I just couldn't carry on any longer” (Line 49-50, Sophie)

“I couldn't sleep that night I was in so much pain” (Line 51, Sophie)

Sophie's reaction to the abuse and her fear of death led her to realise that she could not carry on anymore with the abuse. The feeling of pain and distress was extremely overwhelming for her and she faced the reality that her life might be in jeopardy.

Kylie explains that she was pregnant at the time when her husband abused her which made her fear for her life as well as her unborn child

“he kicked me down...punched me in the stomach...in that moment I knew he didn't care for this baby... I decided this child is my priority and I will do anything to save him...I was not going to let him harm my baby or me I had to survive for him” (Line 57-61, Kylie)

Kylie's experience of the abuse was of mere sadness, anger, distress and fear. The fear was not as much for her as it was for her child's welfare. This fear for the safety of her child aided her in reaching the point of ultimatum that her child was her priority not her abusive partner or the relationship she tried to save for several years.

Monica describes how the fear of being seconds away of being killed brought out the courage and strength in her to take her children and leave

“he held the knife to my throat...I was so close to being killed the kids were crying...I froze and then someone knocked on the door...I just knew there and then this is my chance to scream from the top of my lungs for help...grab my children and run” (Lines 73-76, Monica).

Monica portrays experiencing a panic attack, she experiences emotions of shock, anger, fear and concern for her children and what they are witnessing. Monica saw an opportunity and took it, she decided in that moment she had to protect herself and her children from her abusive partner or the abuse would result in death.

In discussion, previous literature has been persistent in portraying fear as being a factor that forces women to remain in an abusive relationship (Holmes, 2004; Kaur and Garg, 2010; Kim and Gray, 2008). However, this is not the case when

it comes to fear in these women, fear acts as a motivator for them to leave as well as the matter of life and death. In reference to these women, fear became one of the main reason for them to leave the relationship. The danger of staying in an abusive relationship dominated their partners threatening and controlling behaviour which resulted in them realising that leaving the relationship would be crucial for survival (Keeling, Smith & Fisher, 2016). Additionally, literature suggests that the fear of being killed by an abusive partner and the increase in abusive behaviour have shown to be significant factors in influencing women to leave (Silva et al., 2012; Özçakar et al., 2016).

Research demonstrates, that children play an essential role in the weight of a decision for women to leave an abusive relationship (Wettersten et al., 2004) and the findings from this study support this. It is argued that women are motivated to leave an abusive relationship when it concerns their child's safety and welfare, and by leaving they are attempting to protect their children from physical and psychological harm (Sardaryan et al., 2013). Women are incited by the feelings that it is their responsibility to build an exceptional future for their children. Therefore, this serves as a powerful sense for women to gain influence over the decision to leave from an abusive environment for the safety of their children (Brosi & Rolling, 2010).

Super-Ordinate Theme – Support System

This theme represents women's experiences, feelings and emotions of receiving support from the domestic abusive support services. The participants described the experience of feeling safe, hopeful for the future, feeling self-confident, regaining their self-esteem and feeling empowered after accessing the support services which enabled recovery.

Sub-Ordinate theme – Recovery

All participants accounts explained the effectiveness of the domestic abuse support services within their lives which empowered them to recover. Participants described in detail how the support services helped them to make positive changes in terms of improving mental health, providing them with accommodation, legal support and enrolling them on to treatment programs to enable recovery.

Hannah describes her initial experience of receiving support from the services

"I didn't know what I was going to do...I felt so depressed knowing that I had lost everything...but my support worker was very supportive through her I saw an opportunity to rebuild myself again" (Line 88-91, Hannah)

Hannah shares her experience of feeling depressed and lost within herself, she was experiencing the feeling of failure at the time and was unsure what step to take next. However, Hannah felt emotionally supported by her support worker and realised that she now had the opportunity to make a positive change and rebuild her sense of self.

Maya describes how the support services enabled her to support herself, take control of her life and create a positive future for herself

“Leaving the relationship and getting support gave me hope that my life can change...I attended support groups and it was so empowering...hearing the stories of other women and everything they’ve been through gave me the confidence to speak about my journey” (Line 126-130, Maya)

Maya shared her experience of feeling hopeful and optimistic about her future, she explained how listening to other women’s accounts of domestic abuse gave her the confidence to speak about hers. Maya talked about how building friendships with other group members made her value herself which boosted her self-esteem.

Louise describes how initially she felt broken and hopeless when she first accessed the services. She was suffering from symptoms of anxiety and depression, she received counselling which improved her mental health and then later attended support groups which built her confidence, boosted her self-esteem and gave her a sense of empowerment to become independent and work towards her goals in life.

“I was so distressed when I first escaped from the abuse...I was broken...I’m so grateful for the support I’ve received from the services they were so helpful that I felt better within three months...my favourite part was the support groups they helped me find myself again” (Line 149-153, Louise)

Louise shares her views on how influential the support services have been for the year she received support. She experienced happiness during attendance at support groups. She experienced moments of gratitude whilst she expressed her gratefulness for the counselling sessions provided by the services.

In discussion, literature provides evidence that when women leave an abusive relationship they feel lost because of the absence of economic, social and interpersonal resources that are fundamental for their well-being. They experience symptoms of depression, reduced sense of self and resource loss following traumatic life events of domestic abuse (Hobfoll, 1998, 2001). Research suggests that survivors that receive support from the services for over a month show improvement in social support, accessing resources and a greater quality of life (Diener, 2009). These findings support the findings to the current study that the support services play an effective role in enabling recovery for domestic abuse survivors.

Previous research shows that domestic abuse support services intend to increase hope within survivors in order to facilitate them to meet their goals, build their self-efficacy and well-being (Bonanno et al., 2010). Research proposes that support workers treat survivors with support and empathy, which is empirically connected to increasing survivors’ sense of self and self-efficacy (Saleebey, 2006). This literature supports the participants experiences that the services have been effective in helping them to rebuild their sense of self and take control of their life.

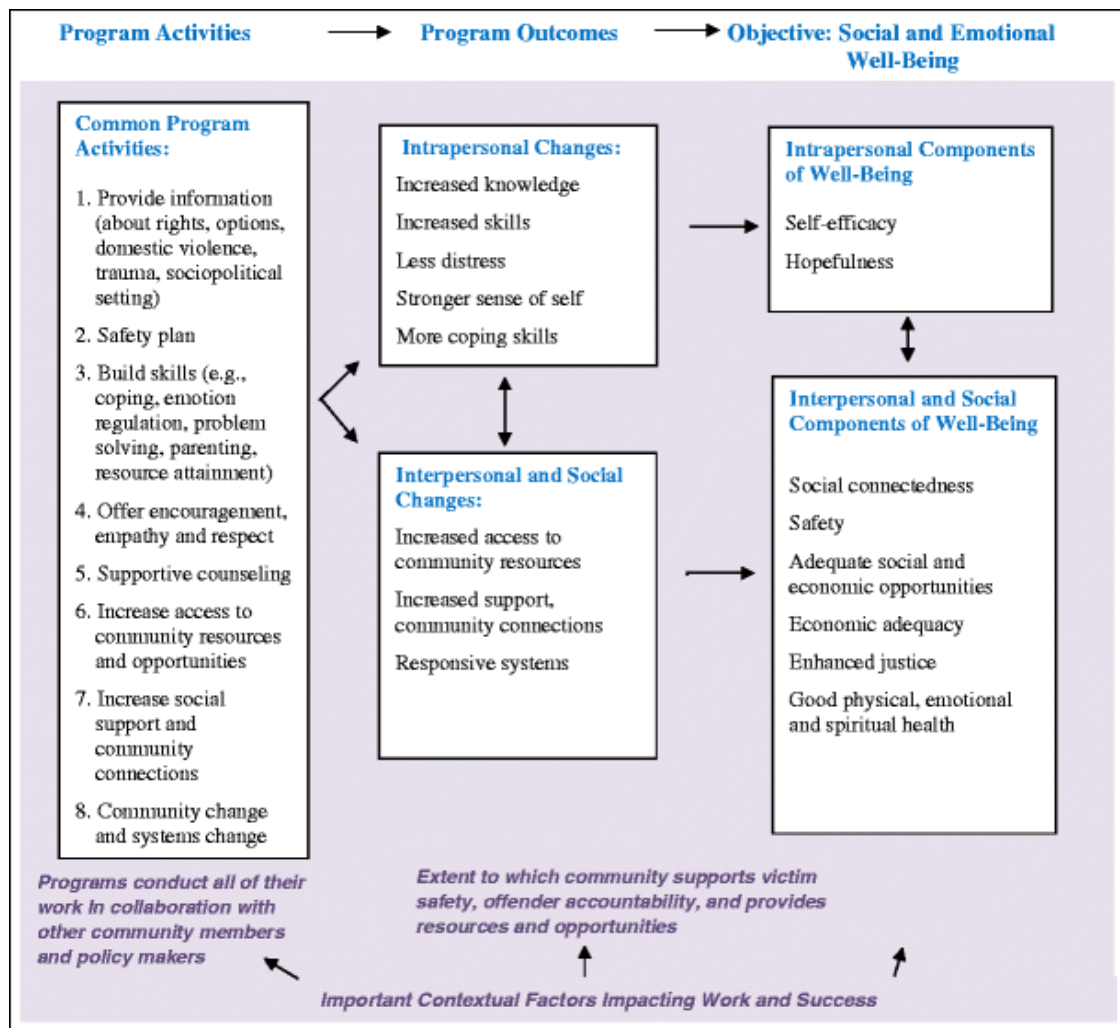


Fig 1. Illustration of how domestic abuse services impact survivors' well-being

Studies suggest that the services provided by the support system such as counselling and support groups have a positive impact on survivors' well-being as well as helping them feel more safe and hopeful (Sullivan & Virden, 2017; Chanmugham, 2011). This shows similar findings to the current study as women were satisfied with the effects of support groups and counselling sessions.

Additionally, findings show that peer support groups have a significant impact on alleviating depression and stress in survivors', as well as increasing their self-esteem, self-efficacy and psychological well-being (Wei et al., 2012). Lastly, literature illustrates that support groups are successful in reducing self-blame and isolation, as well as helping these women to build social relationships with each other and provide mutual support.

Conclusive Summary

Conclusively, domestic abuse negatively impacts the psychological well-being of women. Women who feared their partner, portrayed courage and strength in leaving the abusive relationship and were optimistic of seeking support. The current study found that the support services have positively impacted their well-being, self-esteem, self-efficacy and confidence to help them regain their sense of self. This provides evidence that the interventions used to help these women recover have proven to be an effective tool.

Limitations to the study

Despite this study being an educative stepping stone for the researcher and hopefully the public, there were both strengths and limitations to this study. Firstly, the study considered a limited sample of just six participants in order to follow the recommended IPA methodology. However, the small sample prevents the study from being generalised amongst the wider population of women who have survived domestic abuse and have received support from the services.

Considering the sensitivity of the subject of domestic abuse there is a chance of some bias accounts during the study. Often, women have been trained by society to not talk about their private issues with others (Sukeri & Man, 2017), the participants may have found it embarrassing to speak openly about their previous abusive relationships in fear of judgement.

Lastly, it could be argued that another limitation of this study is the restricted nature of interviewing participants after they had been out of the services for three or more years. This extensive period of time could have affected their recollection of experiences initially after leaving an abusive relationship and accessing the services.

Nonetheless, the findings of the current study add weight and additional data towards the similar findings of studies carried out by Sullivan (2017), Sanderson (2008) and Hague and Mullender (2006). However, there is limited literature available that looks in to the depth of the mechanisms assisting women in leaving abusive relationships and the effectiveness of the support services within the UK that enable recovery.

Reflexive Analysis

This section entails the acknowledgement of how I have been involved in the research process and data analysis. This intends to be a self-reflection, in order to comprehend how my individual experiences and assumptions have determined and embodied the research process and the findings in addition to a reflection on how the research has affected me (Willig, 2007).

This study reflects my interests surrounding the subject of domestic abuse, initially I failed to understand how women were able to stay in an abusive relationship for a long period of time. My assumptions were that they lacked in self-love, courage and belief that they could leave and were incapable of putting themselves before anything else. My views on domestic abuse and the role of women within the situation have changed after completion of the study as I now understand the courage and strength these women have shown in changing their lives around and to what extent the abuse negatively affected them.

Initially I presumed that the women may not fully disclose their experiences due to the sensitivity of the issue. However, the participants were more than forthcoming and listening to their stories made me emotional and realise how I was personally affected by the abuse they endured. After witnessing domestic abuse amongst my family and friends and listening to the participants experiences of domestic abuse I was upset and moved as they triggered memories of my own. After leaving the interviews I would confide in friends without breaching confidentiality in order to lift the emotions I was experiencing so they would not

affect me during the analysis phase and would not influence my selection of themes and results.

I am now satisfied and proud to have reached a better understanding of domestic abuse, the feelings and emotions women experience whilst in the relationship and after leaving. I have been moved by the terrific job the support services are doing to help these women to recover from the traumatic experiences of domestic abuse.

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